

Mongolia's karakorum

People



The ancient city of Karakorum in the 13th century according to history and archaeological records was the seat and the imperial capital of the Mongol Empire of Genghis (or Chinggis) Khan. It is located in the Ovohangai Mongolia, near the Orhon River and Mount Otuken according to Haw (2006, 32). The city was founded and erected by Genghis Khan himself in 1220 to serve as the seat of his vast Mongol Empire and not only served as the administrative center but a major cultural link between the East and the West. Before the 13th century, the area around Karakorum particularly Karabalghasun used to be the seat of the Uyghurs who needed a permanent fortified capital to store resources extorted from China in 750-757.

Ideally, this place was the best choice because the Turks and the Mongols considered the surrounding lands as sacred. After the Uyghurs were destroyed in 840 by the Khirgiz; the region was transformed from a Turkish heartland to a Mongol land. The Khirgiz power was however centered on the Yenisei River to the North which was how the area around Mt. Outuken and Karakorum faded into oblivion according to Findley (2005, 49).

Geographically Karakorum also lies in the northwestern corner of the Övörkhangai Province of Mongolia, near today's town of Kharkhorin.

This region is surrounded by arable land making the soil generally soft and ideal for planting after the annual flooding according to Morgan (1986, 87). The land is also conducive to grazing which is highly acceptable and desirable to a nomadic tribe who relied on horses to travel faster to faraway lands. Present day Mongolia has discovered the ruins of the vast city of Karakorum in an area which was suitable for both crops and livestock and which possessed very old-established mining deposits Morgan(1986, 46).

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As a major geographic route in the Middle Ages, Karakorum is also a saddle between two mountains and a river and considered a relatively easy passage to the East which was how Genghis must have envisioned his central empire. When the Mongols reunited the steppe tribes, they created the largest land-based empire in history interlinking Europe and Asia under Genghis Khan in McCannon (2006, 143). However, prior to their expansion, the Mongols did not have a sophisticated society and proved adept at cultural borrowing as related in McCannon (2006, 144).

History has related how the Mongols behaved like barbarians without any regard for personal care and clothing. As warriors, a nomadic life best suited them and anything that could slow their journey to the next city they could conquer is avoided. However Kwantes revealed that the Mongols massive journey and conquests into other lands awoke them to goods they had never seen (2005, 57). Khan and his men learned to appreciate the beautiful silk, delicious food and exotic items pillaged and gathered from other places (Kwantes, 57). They began to slowly learn about other people's culture which changed their way of lives.

Genghis Khan's advisers told him once, "thou has conquered great empire in the saddle... thou cannot govern it so," (Kwantes 58). Clearly this advisor understood that Khan's nomadic way of life could not continue when vast lands and goods were acquired without a central government devised to rule for such a grown empire. Understanding the need for continuity of the Mongol rule, Genghis Khan now growing older changed the Mongol's nomadic life and decided to establish Karakorum as his headquarters because of its accessibility and spiritual history (Kwantes, 57).

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In its prime Karakorum served not only as the administrative centre of the Mongolian Empire, but also as a major trade and cultural link between East and West in Haw, (2006, 32). The Mongols soon imposed a single political authority, encouraged economic exchange and made travel conditions safer according to McCannon (2006, 144). They began to established cities around their territories and made crucial economic centers passable for merchants, missionaries and travelers of all profession (McCannon, 144).

Genghis Khan desired for his people to learn which is why foreign visitors were encouraged and welcomed so the Mongols could gather knowledge from the foreigners about cultures uncommon to them. Morgan once said that the Mongols were unsophisticated and uncultured who did not know how to write (1986, 114). All this would change later on as Mongol conquest is contemporarily declared as the transfer of intellectual and scientific primacy of the Old World from Islamic societies to Western and Eastern societies in Saunders(2001, 82).

At its height, Karakorum became a busy metropolis served by soldiers, merchants, and craftspeople, many of the latter imported from lands conquered by the Mongolian military in Morgan (1986, 114). The ancient city, with an area of 400 meters by 400 meters, was protected from attackers by a fortified wall, and near each of the wall's four gates, four giant granite turtle sculptures were installed to protect the city from a potentially more dangerous threat: periodic floods from the Orhon River in Morgan (1986: 115).

Karakorum in the 13th century then became home to more than ten thousand people, including Khan's family, noblemen, ministers, military leaders, craftsmen, traders, clergy, and foreign guests, in addition to nomads inhabiting the compounds in Morgan (1986, 114). The huge size of the city was ideal for the city's diverse religions where twelve idol temples of different nations, two mosques in which is cried the and one church of Christians could be found within its walls (Kwantes, 59).

In addition, a diverse population also inhabited the walls with resident Chinese, Alans, Ruthenians, Georgians, Hermenians and other non-Mongol peoples inside as provided in Saunders (2001, 19). Karakorum became a host to a stream of foreign emissaries and traders like Marco Polo and perhaps Ibn Battuta among others. Delegations as far away as India, Arabia, Armenia and Rome, as well as merchants from China, Persia, and other countries along the Silk Route were welcome to the Great Khan's established city.

Town life must have prospered a lot during Genghis reign as archaeological evidence supports how their existence was centered on metallurgy powered by the currents of the Orkhon River. Other findings include arrowheads; iron cauldrons; wheel bushings; evidence of ceramic tiles and sculpture production (Brittanica, 2005). Glass beads production and yarn spindles were also evident along with also Chinese silk and coins that could support the trading activity in the area (Brittanica, 2005).

Recent excavations of the city ruins have indicated that the royal palace was likely burned down at the time of the Min invasion, but it is not clear how

completely the city was demolished (McCannon, 144). Although there is no mention of Karakorum in known historical records of the following 87 years, it is quite possible that the city was never fully abandoned according to McCannon (2006, 144). Indeed the city is the cradle of many Central Asian civilizations with its advanced agriculture and crafts that were highly developed while trade flourished.

Despite European claims that the Tartars (as how Europe called the Mongols) were highly uncivilized and unsophisticated; records would show that Karakorum was once an intellectual community. They honor and respect diverse cultures and religion which has been carried through centuries of repression until 1990's when Mongolians were soon free to practice any religion of choice. Illiteracy has also been eliminated in this modern period as a legacy from its great leaders.

Today the Mongols and their great leaders are remembered as valiant heroes who conquered vast lands against all odds to build a mighty empire or as ruthless conquerors that destroyed everything in their path. Genghis set a certain set of organization, discipline, equipment and mentality to fight for and with his men with a vast army organized into a decimal system, with a commander for every series of 10 units elected by the troops in Morgan (1986, 115).

Military tactics were rehearsed well in preparation and each warrior was expected to know precisely what to do from the signals of the commanders, which took form in flaming arrows, drums, and banners (Morgan, 116). With extreme discipline they combined skill, discipline, and tactics without

Western interference or teaching, learning such divisive techniques on their own. Sometime when the western knights fought with the Mongol horsemen during an invasion, the Europeans were utterly destroyed as the Mongols employed a wide array of tricks that contradicts claims of their uneducated and barbaric status.

Nevertheless, the sheer extent of their conquests revealed how an ailing nation ravaged by poverty and conflict once united under a single cause could reach great heights of power and achievement. Division and greed for power disunited them into utter failure which serves as a lesson for the next generations. I therefore consider the Mongols as the significant players in history because their conquests surpass what any other country has done.

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